

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 660

EA 018 038

AUTHOR Greer, John T.
TITLE The Decisions of Elementary School Principals: A Test of Ideal Type Methodology.
PUB DATE 3 Apr 85
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administration; Administrator Attitudes; *Decision Making; Elementary Education; *Models; *Principals Georgia; *Ideal Type Methodology (Weber); Weber (Max)
IDENTIFIERS

ABSTRACT

Interviews with 25 Georgia elementary school principals provided data that could be used to test an application of Max Weber's ideal type methodology to decision-making. Alfred Schuetz's model of the rational act, based on one of Weber's ideal types, was analyzed and translated into describable acts and behaviors. Interview procedures were designed to reveal these behaviors, and methods were devised for leading the interview data into a matrix for assessment. Sixty-one "unique" decisions, defined as those made without direct precedent and on the decision-maker's own initiative, were found suitable for analysis among those described by the principals. These decisions fell into seven categories: instruction (direct role), instruction (indirect role), students, community and parents, management, finance and budgeting, and safety and maintenance. Of the decisions, 18 percent showed rationality of knowledge but not of choice, 28 percent showed rationality of choice only, 20 percent exhibited both types of rationality, and 38 percent exhibited neither. Three of these groups of decision types could be related to Weber's, but the fourth (those reflecting rational knowledge but not choice) suggested that an additional ideal type should be defined. Brief comments concerning methodological problems conclude the paper. (PGD)

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THE DECISIONS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:

A TEST OF IDEAL TYPE METHODOLOGY

John T. Greer

Georgia State University

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Introduction

There were two objectives in this study. The first was to test the ideal type methodology outlined by Max Weber (1947) and expanded by Alfred Schuetz (1943). In recent years, Weber's methodology has been under attack essentially because it fails to predict the complexity of modern organizations. Such criticism has often been leveled by researchers and other students who describe the ideal type methodology as a "template" approach in which a model is applied to an actual organization or the behavior of organization members. When the model fails to predict structural and human relationships in the organizations, the critics discard this bit of classical theory as an interesting but useless artifact.

There is considerable evidence that Weber did not intend for his ideal types to be applied to on-going situations. His intention was to use the ideal types as tools the social scientist would use in making multiple observations. In effect, the ideal type would become the reference point against which the researcher would compare his or her multiple observations. Instead of thinking of ideal in terms of "best", Weber thought in

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Illinois: April 3, 1985

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terms of "never changing". With a never changing model, then, it was possible to compare any number of observations with the model and to make generalizations about the similarities and differences.

The first objective of the study, therefore, was to design an investigation in which the validity of the ideal type methodology envisaged by Weber could be ascertained. To do so, Schuetz's description of the rational act (1943) was utilized as the ideal type. Schuetz's model was selected because it was found to be the most complete such description in the literature. A second important reason for using the Schuetz model was that Schuetz himself was a student of Weber and patterned his description of the rational act from one of Weber's ideal types of social action (zweckrational) (1947).

The second objective was to study the unique decisions of elementary school principals. Unique decisions were defined as those decisions the principals had not made previously and those that had not been referred to them by superiors or teachers. The first restriction was suggested by Griffiths (1959) with his observation that the vast majority of decisions the administrator makes are not decisions at all but simple repeats of previously made decisions. The second restriction was suggested by Barnard (1938) who indicated that those decisions made by the executive on his or her initiative carried the greatest risk but were also most important to the success of the organization.

Design of the Study

There were several design elements in this study. The first was the careful analysis of Schuetz's model of the rational act (1943, pp. 140-142) and the translation of his descriptions into describable acts and behaviors. The second was designing the interview procedures so as to insure a fair test of the ideal type methodology while obtaining the necessary descriptions of the decisions. The final design element was the establishment of the procedures necessary to load the interview data into a matrix so that they could be compared with the Schuetz model.

The rational act. Schuetz thought of the rational act as reflection and careful deliberation before committing oneself to a course of action. He used John Dewey's term of dramatic rehearsal to explain how the actor, prior to making a choice, would go over the entire sequence of events leading up to and making the choice. The process of deliberation was divided into two parts. The first, a prerequisite of the second, was present when the actor clearly and distinctly understood all of the elements from which he or she had to choose (rationality of knowledge). The second part of the rational act consisted of the actor choosing from among all available means, that means most appropriate for realizing the desired objective (rational choice). Before choosing, however, the actor would have to ascertain which of the means was most appropriate by determining: (1) how the desired objective affected or influenced other plans and objectives already in place, (2) what the desirable and undesirable consequences would be of achieving the objective, (3)

what sorts of procedures or processes were available to achieve the objective, (4) how each of the procedures or processes might impact other on-going programs, and (5) the accessibility of each set of means to the actor.

This then was the Schuetz model. He indicated that such deliberate behavior would not be a common characteristic of anyone's life but that every person was quite capable of completing a rational act when the decision or choice was critical.

Conversion of the ideal type into operational terms.
Schuetz's descriptions were converted into a series of questions to facilitate the analyses of the interview data. Three questions were used to ascertain if the principal clearly and distinctly conceived all of the elements from which he or she had to choose (the definition of rationality of knowledge). [Schuetz's word, "elements," was interpreted to mean possible solutions to a given problem or condition.] The questions were:

- A1. What sources of information did the principal consult to learn about possible solutions? (Possible answers: journals, research literature, textual materials, lectures at professional meetings or college classes, fellow principals, central office personnel and teachers.)
- A2. Did the principal check his or her perceptions of the information received with colleagues or authorities? (including searching the literature)

- A3. Did the principal have complete knowledge of the possible solution(s) including the resources required and the probable outcome or effects?

The availability and appropriateness of the means as well as details of the principal's choice were established through a series of eight questions:

- B1. Did the principal know what he or she wanted to accomplish?
- B2. Was there any indication the principal knew how the possible solution or program would fit into the goals of the school?
- B3. Would the possible solution or program support or interfere with the accomplishment of the school's established goals?
- B4. Did the principal anticipate any problems during the installation of the solution or program?
- B5. Was the principal surprised by any events during the installation process?
- B6. Did the principal consider other possible solutions or programs even though those solutions or programs were later rejected?
- B7. Did the principal anticipate any conflicts between the proposed solution or program and other on-going programs?
- B8. Was there evidence the principal chose the solution or program that was most appropriate and easiest for him or her to implement?

As mentioned above, Schuetz declared that rationality of knowledge was a prerequisite of the rational choice. Rationality of knowledge was judged to be present when two of the three questions (A1 - A3) were answered affirmatively. The choice was considered rational when affirmative answers were given to questions B1, B2 or B3, B4 and B8.

The interviews. Taped interviews were made with the twenty-five principals. The interviews lasted from thirty to ninety minutes. From the tapes, verbatim transcripts were made.

At the time the interview was scheduled, the principal was told that the focus of the study was on the unique decisions principals make. Unique decisions were described as those that had not been referred to the principal by superiors or by teachers and decisions that the principal had not made before. It was further explained that even though the principal might know of others making similar decisions, the decision could be included as long as it was new to him or her.

In the interview, the decisions the principals described were volunteered. No cues or classes of decisions were provided by the interviewer. The principal was encouraged to discuss a decision or decisions of his or her choice.

The interview was conducted with a minimum of structure. The reason for its open ended nature was that the ideal type methodology being studied called for the observation to be compared with the model rather than the reverse. Consequently

every effort was made to avoid forcing the dimensions of the Schuetz model on the principals and having them respond according to those dimensions.

Throughout each interview, a careful check was made to determine if the information required in the study was being voluntarily provided by the principal in his or her description of the decision. When such was not the case, questions were raised to obtain the necessary information. The specific questions that were raised "as needed" were about the source of the idea; if it had come about because of something the principal had heard or read; and if so, where did she or he read it. Another series of questions referred the principal to persons he or she may have talked to about the idea. Were colleagues consulted?, or a supervisor?, or did the principal consult the literature? and so on. A third series of questions was related to how the principal saw the idea fitting into the total school operation and if he or she anticipated any problems or encountered any surprises throughout the process. The next series had to do with the alternative ideas, solutions or programs the principal considered during the decision process. The final series revolved about the reasons the principal provided for making the final decision.

Comparing interview data with the ideal type. The dimensions of the Schuetz model as represented in questions A1-A3 and B1-B8 listed above were placed in a matrix. Each transcript was then analyzed for evidence to answer each question affirmatively or negatively.

Sixty-one decisions were analyzed in this fashion. The results are listed following a description of the sample of elementary school principals.

The Sample

Twenty-five elementary school principals were included in this study. A random sampling procedure was not utilized but the sample was drawn from the entire State of Georgia. Three of the principals were serving in rural or small systems located in the southern part of the state. An additional four represented rural or medium sized systems in the eastern part of the state. Nine of the principals were drawn from a medium size county system in middle Georgia while the remaining nine represented urban and suburban metropolitan Atlanta systems.

Nine of the principals were female and sixteen male. Six black principals and nineteen white were included in the sample.

Five of the principals possessed doctoral degrees and the remaining twenty had sixth year degrees. Of the twenty, thirteen were enrolled and actively pursuing doctoral degrees.

Thirteen of the principals were elementary education majors as undergraduates. Ten of the principals were prepared as secondary teachers with teaching field majors. Two had academic majors but no undergraduate teacher education coursework.

Ten of the principals had only secondary teaching experience before becoming elementary principals or assistant principals. The remaining fifteen had at least some teaching experience in the elementary classroom.

The sample was an experienced group of principals. Total years in the elementary principalship ranged from two to twenty years with the mean being 8.7 years. The number of years in the current principalship ranged from one to seventeen years with the mean being 4.4 years.

The Findings

The decisions. As described above, the principals were not asked to discuss particular types of decisions. The reason for this strategy was to guard against the possibility of any principal feeling that he or she should talk about particular decisions or say things the interviewer wished to hear.

With such an open ended invitation focused on volunteered decisions, it was assumed the principals would choose to discuss those decisions that gave them the most satisfaction. It was acknowledged that satisfaction could come from a variety of factors such as importance to the organization, success of the decision, personal accolades received by the principal, and so on. Nevertheless, the assumption was made that the reported decisions would constitute those recent decisions the principals felt were most important to them personally.

Sixty-one decisions were reported in sufficient detail to be used in the study. The number of decisions reported by individuals ranged from one to five with fifteen principals reporting either two or three.

The decisions fell into seven categories. Two of the categories were devoted to instruction with a distinction made between a principal who took an active role in the instruction process (i.e. actually teaching or otherwise working with students) and one who chose an indirect role (providing resources for new programs, evaluating the instructional efforts of teachers, and so forth). The classifications of the decisions, the number of occurrences and the percentage of the total sample are listed in Table I.

Table I

<u>Decision Category</u>	<u>Number of decisions</u>	<u>Percentage of Total</u>
Instruction (direct role)	12	19%
Instruction (indirect role)	23	38%
Students (including discipline)	6	10%
Community and Parents	6	10%
Management	8	13%
Finance and Budgeting	3	5%
Safety and Maintenance	3	5%

It is interesting to note the majority of the decisions reported fell into the instruction categories. This finding differs from the conventional wisdom found in the journal literature that reflects a wish among elementary principals to

spend time on instruction matters but an inability to find time in the school day to do so.

Source of the principals decisions. Where a decision originates was not a subject addressed in Schuetz's model of the rational act. It was a question raised in the interviews, however, to initiate the discussion of the decision process. Asking the question appeared to focus the principal's thinking on the beginning of the decision process.

Thirty-seven of the decisions appeared to be the unique idea of the principal. When asked where the idea came from, the typical response was, "I don't know. I just thought of it one day." An alternate response in the category was reflected as a vague feeling that things were not as they should be. An example of the type of thing suggested here was the principal who felt that the written lesson plans of the teachers should be more closely tied to the system's curriculum guide.

Seven decisions reflected the existence of an urgent problem. Matters such as unpredicted large or small enrollments at a grade level that called for "creative" solutions were placed in this category.

Six decisions originated somewhere in the principals' previous experiences. This turned out to be an unexpectedly interesting category for, upon analysis, the decisions were made by principals newly assigned to their buildings. These decisions appeared to be imprinting decisions in which the principal was establishing his or her ideas related to the pattern of

organization, student conduct, building cleanliness, or the like. These imprinting decisions are discussed later in the paper as a sub-classification of non-rational acts.

The remaining decisions reflected a variety of sources. Central office administrators, parents, salesmen, and ideas borrowed from other schools were listed as sources of at least one decision.

Comparing the decisions with the ideal type. The bases for comparing the decisions with Schuetz's model of the rational act were described earlier in the paper. Essentially for a decision to be judged a rational act it had to be based, first of all, on the principal's clear understanding of the possible solutions and secondly, on the principal's ability to see how the proposed solution fitted into the plans and on-going operations of the school.

After the decisions were loaded into the matrix, they were judged according to whether or not rational knowledge was present or absent and whether or not the choice was rational. These two binary outcomes led to the array of outcomes listed in Table II.

Twenty percent of the reviewed decisions were judged to be in conformity with the ideal type. This finding is in keeping with Schuetz's comment about rational acts not being a common characteristic of a person's behavior although people are capable of rational acts when confronted with critical questions.

Table II

<u>Outcomes</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
I. Rationality of knowledge but not rational choice	11	18%
II. Rational choice but not rationality of knowledge	17	28%
III. Rational Act (Rationality of knowledge and rational choice both present)	12	20%
IV. Neither rationality of knowledge or rational choice present	23	38%
V. Total number of decisions judged to be based on rationality of knowledge (categories I & III)	23	38%
VI. Total number of decisions judged as being rational choices (categories II & III)	29	48%

Rationality of knowledge was judged to be present in thirty-eight percent of the decisions. The reasons for excluding decisions were almost equally divided among the decisions. Among

those decisions judged not to be based on rational knowledge, the principal did not acknowledge consulting authoritative sources for information in ninety-two percent of the cases. In eighty-two percent, the principal did not report checking his or her understandings of the various solutions with other educators. In seventy-six percent of the cases, the principal did not reflect a clear understanding of the resources required to put the solution into effect or an understanding of the impact the proposed solution would have on the school.

The choices were considered to be rational in forty-eight percent of the cases. The most common reason for judging a choice not rational was the principal did not consider possible problems associated with alternatives prior to implementing his or her decision. This failure to consider problems and consequences was found in thirty-one of the thirty-two decisions judged as non-rational choices (97%).

Ideal Type Methodology

Weber (1947, p.115) posited four ideal types of social action: zweckrational, a rational orientation to discrete individual ends; wertrational, a rational orientation to an absolute value; an affectual orientation based on emotions and feelings; and a traditional orientation based on habits of long standing. Schuetz's model of the rational act utilized in this paper represented an explication of Weber's zweckrational formulation.

Schuetz did not go on to flesh out the wertrational concept although such an accomplishment would have been helpful to the present study. Weber's description of wertrational reflects a rational choicing procedure to accomplish an unexamined end or unprovable value. Such a category is useful in this study for it provides a second classification for those decisions where the choice can be judge rational but the decision is not based on rational knowledge.

The affectual and traditional orientations allow a general classification of those decisions which are not based on rational knowlege and do not reflect a rational choice. Rather such decisions reflect principals operating in an unexamined fashion according to previous patterns and habits.

There was one group of decisions that defied classification. The decisions that reflected a rationality of knowledge but a non-rational choice could not be classified. It was almost as though one could say that in spite of solid evidence to the contrary, the principal chose an alternative other than that indicated.

Listed in Table III is the classification of the decisions according to Weber's ideal types of social action:

Table III

Type	n	% of Total
1. <u>Zweckrational</u> (Schuetz's rational act) [rational knowledge and rational choice]	12	20%
2. <u>Wertrational</u> [rational	17	28%
3. <u>Affectual or traditional</u> [neither rational knowledge or rational choice]	21	34%
4. Decisions that could not be classified [rational knowledge but not rational choice]	11	18%

One final observation related to the decisions is in regard to the twenty-one decisions classified in Table III as falling into the affectual or traditional classifications, the decisions in which rational knowledge and rational choice were not judged to be present. Six of the twenty-one decisions in this classification were the imprinting decisions made by first and second year principals. Their descriptions of the decisions reflected personal needs to bring order out of chaos, to quickly convert the schools into "their" schools, or to correct some

obvious oversight of previous principals. With this sense of self-imposed urgency, these principals did not give any evidence of slow, deliberate action. Rather they reflected a need to do whatever had to be done quickly and without particular regard to the consequences.

A Summary Statement

The study was conducted to determine the utility of Max Weber's ideal type methodology. Schuetz's description of the rational act was utilized as the model and the decisions of twenty five elementary principals served as cases to test the efficacy of the approach.

The methodology appeared to be anything but the artifact critics of classical theory would have one believe. It yielded valuable insights into the thinking and reasoning of the principals as they went about making what, for them, were risky decisions.

In general, one can conclude that the principals in the study were very much involved in the instruction processes of their schools. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that the principals were not "shooting from the hip." They were attempting to make reasoned choices to accomplish ends they pretty well understood. In this regard, one is reminded of Herbert Simon's concept of "intendedly rational" (1947).

Two improved behaviors would have remarkably improved the ratings of the included decisions. If the principals had relied more heavily on the literature and other authoritative sources for information about their decisions, they would have improved

the rationality of their knowledge. Secondly, if the principals had been more conscious of the need to anticipate the problems and consequences as they implemented their decisions, they similarly would have improved the quality ratings of their decisions.

Work remains to be done with Max Weber's ideal type methodology. The work of Alfred Schuetz leads the way by fleshing out the zweckrational concept. A similar effort must be made with the wertrational concept and clarifications should be made of the affectual and traditional orientations.

Methodologically, the present study has lacked the precision one would like in conducting the interviews. Subsequent studies will be designed with greater structure in the interviews to provide more useful data. It is believed that such an objective can be accomplished without doing violence to any tenets of Max Weber's Ideal Type Methodology.

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